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ABSTRACT

Research on the news media's reporting on suicide and mental illness is understudied in Australia despite the controversial nature of much coverage and its possible consequences for a variety of audiences. This paper critiques the underlying assumptions of most international research in this area, which follows a media imitation or contagion model. The paper details the theory guiding the qualitative section of a major 18-month study of Australian media coverage of suicide and mental illness. The project will be completed in 2001. In this paper, the Australian government's media guidelines for journalists reporting on suicide are examined and, using media framing theory as a departure point, selected media coverage is assessed. The paper illustrates how the examination of media representations of suicide can inform the public policy debate. Contains 67 references and 2 notes. (Author/RS)

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Mass Media Portrayals of Suicide: Informing the Australian Policy Debate.

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Mass Media Portrayals of Suicide: Informing the Australian Policy Debate.

Abstract

Research on the news media's reporting on suicide and mental illness is understudied in Australia despite the controversial nature of much coverage and its possible consequences for a variety of audiences. The paper critiques the underlying assumptions of most international research in this area, which follows a media imitation or contagion model. The paper details the theory guiding the qualitative section of a major 18-month study of Australian media coverage of suicide and mental illness. The project will be completed in 2001. In this paper, the Australian government's media guidelines for journalists reporting on suicide are examined and, using media framing theory as a departure point, selected media coverage is assessed. The paper illustrates how the examination of media representations of suicide can inform the public policy debate.

Mass Media Portrayals of Suicide: Informing the Australian Policy Debate.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the underlying framework and methods used in a substantive Australian study on media portrayals of suicide and mental illness, which is funded by the Mental Health Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. The paper briefly surveys the research literatures on media and suicide and then describes how the current project will add to our knowledge of how Australian media portray suicide.

The question of whether media portrayals of suicide can lead to imitation has been debated for more than two centuries but it is only in the last 30 years or so that systematic research has been conducted. Most reviews of the literature begin with Goethe's (1774) *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which the hero shot himself because his love was unattainable. A reported increase in suicides in several European countries led to the assertion that the book was directly influencing some of its readers to take their own lives. Consequently, the book was banned in a number of European countries. (Motto, 1967 has chronicled similar historical examples). In his research program, Phillips (1974) coined the term the 'Werther Effect' and it is now commonly used to describe the posited relationship between media portrayals of suicide and imitation acts, including completed suicides, attempted suicides and suicide ideation.

A large research literature now exists on the relationships between media portrayals of suicide and subsequent suicidal behaviours. The basic design used in this research program is a point of departure for the current study.

Suicide as Media Effect

One of the earliest studies of the impact of newspaper reports of suicide on imitative suicides examined whether a newspaper strike would lead to a reduction in suicides. Motto (1967), using data from seven American cities, found little support for his hypothesis. In a second study in Detroit, he found the newspaper 'blackout' was associated with a significant lowering of the suicide rate for females, particularly those aged under 35 (Motto, 1970). Replications by Blumenthal and Bergner (1973) following the 1966 New York newspaper strike found that the overall suicide rate was not significantly lower during the strike period but female suicide rates were lower.

Many studies have elaborated this basic design. For example, Phillips (1974) examined the frequency of suicide in months in which a front-page suicide article appeared in the United States press between 1947 and 1968 and compared this with the frequency in corresponding months in which no such article appeared. Adjusting for seasonal effects, he found a significant increase in suicides after 26 front-page articles, and a decrease after seven. The effect increased as a function of the amount of publicity given to the

story, was particularly evident for young people, and was strongest in the geographical areas where the suicide story was published. (Also see Phillips 1980, 1979, 1978, 1977).

In Australia, for example, Hassan (1995), identified what he termed 'high impact' suicide stories published in the Australian press (the Melbourne *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*) between 1981 and 1990 and found that the national daily average suicide rate increased significantly after such stories for males but not for females. Hassan argued (1995: 482) that the gender difference may reflect the newspapers' emphasis on reporting male suicides thus increasing possible imitation. Males are also heavier newspaper readers than females. The gender difference may also be related to the lethality of suicide method used by males; males tend to use more violent, lethal methods than females.

Similar studies on the impact of television have been conducted. (See, for example, Bollen and Phillips, 1982; Phillips and Carstensen, 1986; Phillips and Carstensen, 1988; Stack, 1993, 1990, 1989). While the majority of studies suggest that there is an association between televised suicide stories and actual suicide rates, several studies have produced null findings (Kessler et al, 1988; 1989, and Horton and Stack, 1984.

Our review of this extensive medico-sociological literature (Pirkis and Blood, 2001) concludes there is an association between non-fictional media portrayal of suicide and actual suicide. Using strict criteria to establish causality, we demonstrate that, at least in some cases, this association is likely to be causal. The evidence is more equivocal in the case of fictional presentations of suicide in films and on television, and in music. Other reviews have reached similar conclusions, but have done so using less rigorous criteria (e.g. Hafner and Schmidtke, 1986; Stack, 1987; Goldney, 1989, Schmidtke and Hafner, 1989; Phillips, Lesyna and Paight, 1992; Schmidtke and Schaller, 1998; Martin, 1998; Schmidtke and Schaller, in press).

Overall, the research findings fit with the mainstream theoretical literature that suggests that imitative suicides may occur in the context of social learning theory. In social learning theory, the characteristics of the observer and the model, and the interplay between the two, are important. Observers may be more likely to respond to non-fictional models than fictional ones, particularly if they are similar to themselves or if they have special status.

Our review makes it clear, however, that there is much that is still not known. For example, further research, in the tradition of what has been reviewed, needs to examine the causal link between fictional portrayal of suicides and actual suicides. Relatively little is known about the extent or nature of media portrayal of suicide in traditional media like newspapers and television. Still less is known about its extent in newer and increasingly available media such as multimedia and the Internet. Without this information, it is difficult to determine the overall impact of media portrayal on suicide rates. Nor do we know what types of media various groups in Australian society use; this is especially the case for pre-teenagers and teenagers. It may be, for example, that this group is much more likely to access popular magazines, multimedia, or the Internet than to read a newspaper. Other obvious gaps in knowledge include explication of the above-mentioned

relationship between model and observer, and the extent to which at-risk individuals actively seek reports of others' suicides in order to validate their own experiences and/or to assist in the steps towards completion of suicide. In addition, the extent to which responsible reporting of suicide can have a positive impact on suicidal behaviour has not yet been adequately explored.

The current research, however, moves away from this tradition. Despite the extensive overseas research program, relatively little is known about the extent or nature of media portrayal of suicide.

Critique of the 'Effects' Research

At a theoretical level the concern is that the research literature focuses almost exclusively on 'media effects', where researchers have attempted to link exposure to mass media content with suicide rates or similar indicators. A stimulus-response model underpins the theoretical framework. Media content is the stimulus, with the receiver conceptualised as *an* audience and, mostly, as a passive audience. That is, there is no recognition of contemporary audience analyses or reception theory (Alasuutari, 1999; McQuail, 1997; Tulloch and Lupton, 1997). The capacity of audiences to make meaning out of media messages, or to misinterpret messages, or to resist messages, is not explored. Equally, media content is not adequately assessed; content is taken as a given and viewed as a 'stimulus'. Little attempt is made to analyse the range of meanings available in media portrayals of suicide and related issues.

Most importantly, from a policy perspective, the focus on research projects designed to support or question relationships between media coverage of suicide and the prevalence of suicidal behaviours leads to a very limited conception of media responsibilities, and an overly narrow framework for evaluating media performance. The longer-term picture that the news media presents of suicide (and mental illness) should be the primary focus. Additionally, many questions arise from the clash between the imperatives of the news organisation, and the imperatives of government initiatives concerning the reporting of suicide.

It is also important to distinguish between demonstrable effects and beliefs about effects. Irrespective of whether specific media effects of suicide reporting (on knowledge, attitudes or behaviours) can be demonstrated, various groups – health and medical experts, journalists and editors, lay people, and at-risk groups – perceive that the media does have influence.

A related critique comes from critical sociologists in questioning whether suicide rates can be meaningfully related directly to social facts or social indicators. Typically, such indicators include youth unemployment rates, measures of moral decline in society, rates of family breakdowns, homelessness statistics, economic and technological change measures, and even 'globalisation'. (See, for example, Eckersley, 1993, 1992, 1988; Watts, 1998; Bessant and Watts, 1998). Popular media discourse also frequently links suicide to these social factors.

Watts (1998) notes that the paradigm (in the tradition of Durkheim's 1897 (1970) classic study, *Suicide*) argues that social structure constrains or shapes individual identity or behaviour, and that it privileges a particular statistical methodology. The central assumption is that suicide rates have sociological significance and are causally linked to social facts like rising rates of youth unemployment, etc. Completed suicide is a rare phenomenon. The argument is not that suicide is so rare that data cannot be collected but rather how that data is theorised and analysed.

This focus on media effects at the expense of other equally important research questions limits the way the literature can inform current media practice and future communication strategies. For example very little research addresses the following central issues:

- What is the extent of media coverage of suicide and mental illness compared to coverage of other health issues? And, what role do new media (Internet, multimedia) play?

- What is the nature of this coverage; that is, how are news, information and non-fictional accounts of suicide and mental illness portrayed?

- How is suicide and mental illness treated in different media genres? For example, suicide on 'talk radio' compared to 'straight' radio news reporting of suicide?

- How is suicide or mental illness as an event or issue characteristically framed? What are the dominant frames? And, what information is excluded?

- Who are the prime agents (politicians, policy makers, health and medical experts, journalists, editors, or lay-people) setting the agenda of news and information and non-fiction accounts of suicide and mental illness?

The Australian Media Monitoring Project

The Australian Suicide and Mental Illness Media Monitoring project is designed to go beyond examinations of media content and suicide rates. There are two components to this 18-month study. The first[1] component comprises a content analysis of all major metropolitan Australian newspapers and all newspapers published in the state of Victoria, and randomly selected capital-city broadcast news and current affairs programs. This analysis examines news and current affairs content against a rating scale, which measures compliance with the government's resource kit suggestions for journalists on reporting suicide and mental illness. The second component[2], upon which this paper focuses,

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[1] This research is being conducted by Jane Pirkis, Catherine Francis and colleagues, at the Centre for Health Program Evaluation at the University of Melbourne.

[2] Warwick Blood, Peter Putnis, Trish Payne and colleagues at the University of Canberra are conducting this research.

involves a qualitative analysis of selected newspaper content drawn from the first component (major metropolitan newspapers and all newspapers from the state of Victoria) with the addition of selected regional and local newspaper, and broadcast content.

The key objective of the project is to first provide practical advice for developing future communication strategies that could be adopted by the Department of Health and Aged Care. In particular, the research will inform the process of revising future media kits developed by the Department to foster responsible reporting of suicide and mental illness. Secondly, the research aims to suggest ways of monitoring media coverage of suicide, mental illness, and mental health in the future.

Fundamentally, the media monitoring project goes beyond descriptions of news content using traditional content analysis. Using the quantitative content analyses as a guiding framework, the qualitative research component focuses on identifying factors that shape news selection and presentation. The approach is underpinned by the media studies literature on how news is selected and presented.

Media Framing Theory

Research on media framing (Scheufele, 1999) analyses how media content is presented and made understandable to the public. Just as a photographer may "frame" a photograph, it is reasoned that journalists or producers, constrained by their daily routine practices, the imperatives of their media organisation, and social and cultural influences, 'frame' a story. Colloquially, editors talk of the angle or pitch of the story.

The story's frame, often signalled in the newspaper headline or broadcast lead, directs the reader to what is in the frame, and not to attend to what is excluded. McQuail (1994: 331) argues that mass media have a strong impact by constructing social reality by "framing images of reality ... in a predictable and patterned way". Subsequent impact on the audience, however, may be limited and constrained by a variety of factors. Gitlin (1980: 7) argues that in everyday life, frames allow us to manage and comprehend reality and choose appropriate repertories of cognition and action:

> Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organise the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports. Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organise discourse, whether verbal or visual.

Thus, framing examines how media professionals portray suicide and mental illness information but it is also examines how information is 'packaged' and received by audiences; the framework adopted by the current study.

For example, Barkin and Gurevitch (1987) examine what they term themes in news coverage of the unemployment issue in America to analyse how stories were "framed,

explained and understood". Similarly, Iyengar (1991) distinguishes between episodic and thematic frames in an analysis of attitudes toward poverty in America. Thematic frames (in Iyengar's terms) are said to engender a strong sense of societal responsibility in contrast to episodic frames, which engender a strong sense of individual responsibility. He argues those news stories focusing on individuals, or on specific groups, may make the public see the poverty issue as an individual problem and not one requiring social or government action.

In Australia, Blood (1997) shows how news about public opinion data (a poll published by a prominent newspaper) is used to frame public debate about Aboriginality and immigration. Relying upon flawed polling methodology, and editorial perceptions of a 'divided Australian society', the news report is an example of how one frame is chosen to represent 'public opinion' instead of other competing frames. Putnis (forthcoming 2001) demonstrates that the media are sites of contestation over competing accounts of poverty in Australia. He argues that the media by privileging specific frames propagate particular understandings of the poverty issue, which in turn determines perceptions of what needs to be done. For example, the prevalence of negative images of the poor contributes to the political marginalisation of the issue.

Entman (1993: 25) offers a detailed explanation of how the media provides audiences with schemas for interpreting events. The essential factors, he says, are selection and salience:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.

Using a detailed analysis of a prominent newspaper story as an exemplar, Pan and Kosicki (1993) describe the structure of news discourse and framing devices. They identify these types of structural dimensions that influence the formation of frames:

- Syntactic structures or patterns in the arrangement of words or phrases;
- Story structures, reflecting the general newsworthiness of an event or its importance, and the intention to signal that this is 'news';
- Thematic structures, reflecting the tendency of journalists to impose a causal theme on their news stories, either in the form of explicit causal statements, or by linking observations to the direct quotes of a source; and
- Rhetorical structures, referring to stylistic choices made by journalists.

Similarly, Entman (1993) examines media frames (as attributes of news) in influencing both political-decision making and public opinion. (Also see, Scheufele, 1999). In content analyses of American print media and network television news, Entman identifies

traits of media texts that set a frame of reference and, therefore, have a critical impact on information processing:

- Importance judgements;
- Agency (or to answer the question: Who did it?);
- Identification with potential victims; and
- Categorisation, or choice of labels for incidents
- Generalisations to a broader national context

Using Entman's (1993) schema and the Pan and Kosicki (1993) exemplar, we have begun to analyse newspaper content and compare it to what we term 'preferred frames' as identified in the Australian government's resource kit for journalists. (Also see, Hazelton, 1997 for a similar study on mental illness in the Australian press; and Philo, 1996 for the Glasgow Media Group's study of mental illness and mass media in the UK).

Preferred Media Frames

Several governments have introduced media 'resource kits' in attempt to foster responsible reporting of suicide and mental illness. Examples include: Department of Mental Health, World Health Organization, 2000; Michel, Frey, Wyss and Valach, 2000; NSW Health, 1997; New Zealand Youth Prevention Strategy, 1999; The Samaritans: Media Guidelines on Portrayal of Suicide, 1998; Etzersdorfer and Sonneck, 1998; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1994; Etzersdorfer, Sonneck and Nagel Kuess, 1992; Sonneck, Etzersdorfer and Nagel Kuess, 1994.

Research by Michel (2000) and his colleagues suggests that such resources can have an impact on the behaviour of journalists and editors, and the studies by Etzersdorfer (1998, 1992) and his colleagues suggests that this changed behaviour can translate into a positive impact on suicide rates.

In Australia, the *Media Resource for the Reporting and Portrayal of Suicide* (Penrose-Wall, Baume and Martin, 1999), published by the Mental Health Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, provides similar direction to journalists and editors. The current project will inform the revision of this resource kit.

There are fundamental similarities across these resource kits; all have to goal of improving news reporting of suicide and mental illness with some, perhaps, a little more prescriptive than others. Some of the 'kits' includes the title (or sub-heading), ' guidelines'. The Australian media resource kit contains the following information.

Suicide stories should be *positioned* on the inside pages of a newspaper, magazine, journal, in the second or third break of television news, or further down the order of radio reports rather than making it a headline, front page or top of the bulletin news story. This guideline is based on the reported link between front-page prominent suicide stories and increased incidence of copycat suicide. Prominently featured stories are said to be more noticeable and given greater weight in terms of importance or notoriety to audiences, and this can make suicide a more credible course of action to some vulnerable people.

The kit says that constantly *repeating stories* on suicide, especially on television may have the effect of normalising suicide for viewers and listeners. The view is that people can become desensitised, as they do to many forms of violence or harm, through constant exposure and repeated messages.

The word suicide should be used with caution and sparingly, the kit says. The suggestion is that suicide reports that are highly emotionally charged, which use sensational headlines, or which have an over-emphasis on the word suicide are said to be more likely to encourage imitation suicide.

The kit also warns that *overly explicit descriptions, photographs or video of the method and location can be particularly dangerous*. The suggestion is that a 'step by step' description can provide an impetus and mechanism for some vulnerable people.

Journalists and editors are advised to clearly consider the repercussions of reporting *celebrity suicide*. This advice is based on the research that suggests reporting of celebrity suicide can influence suicide rates in some cultural contexts and times. The 'air of tragedy' and the almost 'legendary' status of celebrity suicides, it is argued, can add to the perceived glamour and attraction of suicide for some young people.

Journalists and editors are urged to consider the 'bigger picture' or *context* in order to inform and educate their audiences about suicide. For example, stories on the strong relationship between mental illness and suicide risk - for example, depression as a risk factor for suicide - can help to place the situation into context. It can also help people understand suicide is part of a bigger problem and challenge for society.

The kit also urges journalists and editors *to avoid glamorising suicide in dramatic presentations*. Most kits urge journalists and reporters, in depicting suicide as part of a storyline in a drama, to emphasise the devastation following the act rather than focusing too heavily on the act itself. Also journalists and editors, it is argued, should stress the finality and not overdramatise the act.

Special consideration should be given to the bereaved. The kit says the bereaved are often at risk themselves and it is suggested that journalists and editors look to their own professional codes of practice for advice on contacting the bereaved.

The Australian kit in common with similar overseas resources includes suggestions and advice about *language in news stories about suicide*. For example, instead of referring to

a first suicide attempt as 'unsuccessful', journalists and editors are told to report that the first suicide attempt was "not fatal'. Similarly, a 'suicide epidemic' should be reported as 'increasing rates'. Rather than reporting someone is a 'suicide' or a 'depressive', the kit suggest terms such as 'died by suicide' or 'the person was depressed at the time of their death'.

Most kits also caution against reporting about the method of suicide. For example, the Australian advice is that instead of saying 'the woman died after placing a hose inside her car window' journalists should simply state that 'the woman died of asphyxiation'.

Dramatic or violent phrases such as a 'bizarre suicide pact' should be replaced by saying 'the deaths were allegedly planned by the couple'.

In addition to providing advice hotlines or web sites for journalists and editors, most resource kits strongly suggest that suicide stories contain information about where readers can get help about mental health services. The resource kit also includes relevant professional contacts for journalists and editors.

In summary, the resource kits are focused on potential media imitation or 'copycat' suicide, as is much of the public and media debate. Clearly, such a position is vitally important in any advice for journalists and editors but there are other central issues in assessing media portrayals of suicide. These issues, as outlined above, widen the debate and policy advice beyond simplistic notions of media effects. For example, what is the extent of media coverage of suicide and mental illness, compared to coverage of other health issues? And, what is the nature of this coverage? How is suicide or mental illness as an event or issue characteristically framed? What are the dominant frames - as a way of identifying the longer-term media picture of suicide and mental illness? These questions are central to the current study.

Examining Newspaper Suicide Frames:

As a preliminary observation, newspaper reports on individual suicides in the Australian press are uncommon, in comparison to the number of actual suicides and attempted suicides. Suicide stories resemble other stories in that they are particularly framed. Common suicide frames involve 'human interest' or 'oddity' or 'public interest' or 'prominent person' or 'celebrity' devices. The following examples illustrate our approach in analysis.

The Sun-Herald (27 February 2000: 5) headlined a story, "Inquest call as Shannon succumbs to demons. Did we fail a tragic young life?" The story details the life of a NSW state ward Shannon, who killed herself in a Department of Community Services flat. The story continues criticism of the beleaguered Department of Community Services – a recurring press theme in recent months. The Department has been repeatedly criticised for failing to uphold its mandate of a 'duty of care' to several children for which it was responsible.

The headline signals the frame: a call for an inquest by one of Shannon's former case managers and a questioning of the efficacy of social services. But, as a story of individual suicide, it is also framed by 'rational or moral inevitability' – or the failure of the 'system' leading to her 'inevitable' death represented in the lead by the *Herald* as a *fait accompli*: "Shannon Thompson battled her demons for 17 years. And when the daily struggle to persuade herself that she should live became too much, the State ward did the one thing she felt was in her power – she chose the time she would die".

Shannon's "demons" result from her tragic life – "a tragic life destroyed" - of sexual abuse by a family friend, self-mutilation, anorexia, bulimia and severe depression and, says the *Herald*, "an endless parade of counsellors and carers". The story creates its own internal logic as disparate facts – direct quotations from her former case manager – are pieced together to form a narrative to support the dominant frame of 'yet another failure by DOCS'. Predicably, the story ends with the Minister for Community Services not offering comment until investigations are completed; an understandable response. Note again the headline. It is 'we' as audience, 'normal society' and DOCS, who may have failed 'a tragic life'.

At one level, the chosen frame may be reasonable, given the circumstances. At another level, we recognise that this particular news story is not singular – it is an 'instance of something'. Presenting news involves casting new materials in terms of such ongoing themes as 'crime is on the increase', 'the economy is in a bad way', 'unions are in opposition', 'disaster on the roads', and so on. As Fishman (1978: 536) puts it, "news makers make incidents meaningful only as instances of themes".

Those newsworthy themes act as framing devices, which construct a particular way of seeing events and issues. These frames cannot be judged as right or wrong but, nevertheless, they are capable of being challenged and extend the media and public debate beyond media imitation or contagion. The consequences of media framing for public understanding, particularly if there are circumstances where a limited range of frames comes to dominate news discourse, needs to be assessed.

As a contrast to 'Shannon's story', the *Frankston Standard* (28 February 2000: 2), a regional Victorian newspaper, headlines a report: "Saved from Suicide". The story is about 'Sharon' who received counselling when she contemplated suicide. The story's dominant frame is 'hope' and details, through her own words, how 'Sharon' found help and a new life. The lead sets the tone, although its does not comply with the usual suicide reporting guidelines: "Unlike many people contemplating suicide, by the time 'Sharon' started measuring whether the vacuum cleaner hose would reach her car's rear window so she could gas herself, she realised she needed serious help."

Using 'Sharon's' frank narrative as a structure, the story offers advice on where to get help through Lifeline and the local Frankston Hospital. Says 'Sharon': "There really is hope if seriously depressed people get help".

Other headlines from our data set begin to tell us something about the frames used in individual suicide news stories. For example:

"Former top PS chief to probe suicide of intelligence officer" (*Canberra Times*, 2 March: 3).

"Suicide spurs plea for youth" (*West Australian*, 2 March: 1).

"High school in mourning: Five deaths stun students" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 27 March: 17).

"Australian threatens suicide in US Congress" (*West Australian*, 19 May: 5)

"Refugees threaten mass suicide" (Canberra Times, 25 May: 3) and "Boat people make mass death threat" (*West Australian*, 24 May: 1).

"Police back suicide theory " (*Courier Mail*, 27 May: 15).

A horrible place to die. (*Courier Mail*, 8 July: 25).

"Body horror for students" (*Herald-Sun*, 3rd Edition, 7 June: 2) and "Anger at death site playtime" (*Herald-Sun*, 1st Edition, 8 June: 3)

"Bad boy rapper's wife tries suicide" (*Courier Mail*, 12 July: 12) and "Rapper's wrist-slasher wife" (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 July: 42).

Coroner's Inquests & Courts

Many newspaper stories about suicide result from information collected by journalists at an official inquiry, or a coronial inquest, or some other court proceeding. Courts and the police are routine sites for gathering news, and news organisations invest considerable resources in this type of journalism. Crime and court information is easily accessible by journalists and editors because it can be planned for and predicted, especially among the myriad of information that might be available to a news organisation. The idea of news as predictable may seem paradoxical but, as Park (1940) observed many years ago, news is "on the whole the accidents and incidents that the public is prepared for … the things that one *fears and that one hopes for* that make news". (Emphasis added). Recall, Galtung and Ruge's (1965) succinct comment that news is actually 'olds'.

Many researchers have also commented on the over-representation by the news media of crime and deviance in our society. (See, for example, McQuail, 1994: 203). News information selected in the form of direct quotes from court testimony is privileged information and can be reported with impunity. Often this information involves themes of fear, horror, even shock, and information can be deeply personal and intimate. Editors and readers see crime reports as offering a snapshot of the 'dark side of life' played out as 'real-life' drama. In both a personal and societal sense, crime and court news stories

define 'normal' in our society by setting the boundaries of what is 'good' and what is 'bad', 'evil' or 'deviant'. Hartley (2000: 40) usefully observes that journalistic occupational ideology is founded on violence and conflict: "truth is violence, reality is war, news is conflict". The perceived demands of the newspaper reader, notions of journalistic accountability, and the ideal type of the journalist, says Hartley, "all converge in a passion of conflict".

Women who commit crime can sometimes be framed in news stories as doubly deviant in that they exceed 'normal' expectations. They commit an offence but also contravene the dominant media stereotype of being female (gentle, nurturing, sex-object, motherhood). Femininity as a concept prescribes passivity and gentleness; violence is 'unnatural' (Naylor, 1990:4).

The continuing coverage in 2000 of the media labelled 'Moran case' in Sydney illustrates some of these observations about court reporting. Far from this Sydney family tragedy, the *Adelaide Advertiser's* (24 March: 13) coverage of Greta Moran's testimony dramatically frames in the headline a 'deviant and abnormal' mother: "Greta Moran 'feels no guilt' over son suicide". The lead to the story contradicts. "Greta Moran has told a packed courtroom she would do 'anything on this earth' to have her son Brendan alive again. Defending herself over a claim by estranged daughter-in-law that she drove Brendan to suicide, Mrs Moran said she felt no guilt over the tragedy".

The conflict in the choice of frame is noteworthy. The court reporter's lead frames the story around the theme that the mother (Greta) would do anything to see her son alive. The headline frames the story as 'guiltless mother'; resonating with the recurring theme of news reporting of the case over the past months. Why was this continuing story national news? The 'events' involve a rich family; Doug and Greta Moran and their son Peter, and their deceased son Brendan. The parents are labelled by the media as 'health care tycoons'. Their daughter is well known to the media and public; she was the leader of the anti-Republican movement at the recent Constitutional Referendum. The estranged daughter-in-law Kristina sued the family and its companies for emotional and physical harassment of Brendan Moran, whose suicide occurred in 1995. The case draws largely on Brendan Moran's suicide note, which refers to his mother, Greta, as a 'conniving' and 'destructive' woman. This raw and intimate glimpse of a powerful, rich family fighting among itself is the essential chaff of sensational journalism and conflict. We might question, though, whether any of this is in 'the public interest'.

Numerous stories centre on suicides in police custody and resulting coroner inquests. During the study's data collection period thus far, stories on these coroner's inquests account for the largest proportion of individual suicide news. Major inquests include: Tasmania's Risdon Prison inquiry by the State Coroner into the deaths of five prisoners, Western Australia's inquiry by the State Coroner into the deaths of three psychiatric patients at Graylands Hospital, and the inquiry into the deaths of five prisoners at Victoria's Port Philip Prison. News from the coroner's court was clearly important and dominated news in each of these three states. In other states coroner's inquiries and reports about death in custody are significant sources of news about suicide.

As an example, the following headlines selected from the Risdon coverage among Tasmania's newspapers indicate clearly the dominant frames operating but they also reveal something about the choices available to journalists and editors:

"Inquest told of suicide all-clear". (*The Hobart Mercury*, 28 March: 5) vs "Prisoner talked of suicide". (*The Examiner*, 29 March: 14)

"Inquest told of drug dose" (*The Hobart Mercury*, 4 April: 5) vs "Inmate 'received maximum dose'" (*The Examiner*, 4 April: 1)

"Inquest hears of prisoner's drug terror" (*The Hobart Mercury*, 5 April: 3) vs "Inmate's plea to stop medication" (*The Examiner*, 5 April: 4)

vs "Doctor was 'killing me'" (*The Advocate*, 5 April: 4)

"Prison suicide shock for mum" (*The Hobart Mercury*, 8 April: 7) vs "Son turned into animal, mum recalls" (*The Examiner*, 8 April: 9)

and "Voices 'plagued' inmate" (*Examiner (Launceston)*, 8 April: 9)

"Inquest 'a witch-hunt'" (*The Examiner*, 3 May: 12) vs "Inquest witch-hunt fear" (*The Hobart Mercury*, 3 May: 3)

"Only one applicant for the job" (*The Advocate*, 4 May: 3) vs "Psych boss 'failed test'" (*The Examiner*, 4 May: 6)

"Jager in training on job" (*The Advocate*, 19 May: 4) vs "Jager's experience 'limited'" (Examiner, 18 May:6)

and "Prison doctor a raw recruit" (*The Hobart Mercury*, 19 May: 3)

These types of news stories pose particular problems when assessed against the suicide resource kit suggestions and guidelines. Often stories depart from the guidelines and this can sometimes be seen in the headline. Descriptions of the method of suicide, or attempts by the journalist to establish causes, are typical examples.

Yet the stories are, for the most part, accurate accounts of what happened in court, despite the dramatic headlines. Testimony is reported. This news results from an 'official' source (a coroner) and journalists and their editors will rightly claim that they should be free to report 'evidence' as they see it within, of course, the constraints of court reporting. Indeed, it can be argued that the 'deaths in custody' issue has brought to heightened public awareness by vigorous reporting. But, on the other hand, any news report is a

condensation and selection of much testimony given in a day, and what happens on one day may be challenged the next.

Thus, an important issue is one of context, especially in a long-running inquiry such as for the Risdon Prison. Journalists and editors would view the on-going inquiry as *one story* but for each session, the journalist and editor do put a frame on the story – it's *their* version of what happened in court that day.

To illustrate these points, consider the news feature in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (16 September: 21) on the opening of the Darwin coroner's inquest into the death of a 15-year-old Aboriginal boy; the first death in custody under the Northern Territory's controversial mandatory sentencing laws.

The story appeared on the front page of the Saturday News Review section, accompanied by a dramatic colour photograph of the boy's grieving relatives at his recent funeral. The headline reads: "A Stolen Life". The lead paragraphs reports on the court proceedings:

> "The death of a 15-year-old boy, in custody and alone, has become a symbol of a bigger tragedy unfolding in the Northern Territory.
>
> It takes surprisingly little time and effort to commit suicide by strangulation. It is not necessary to hang from the ceiling or jump from a chair. If the ligature compresses the most vulnerable part of your neck, the weight of your head alone is enough to cut the blood flow through the jugular veins and/or carotid arteries.
>
> Once that happens, or once your tongue is pressed up and back to block your windpipe, unconsciousness comes in about 10 seconds. Three to five minutes after that, your brain begins to die the higher parts first, then, more slowly, the brain stem which controls the vital functions of heartbeat and breathing.
>
> Dr Michael Zillman, forensic pathologist at the Royal Darwin Hospital, detailed it all quite unemotionally, and with the aid of diagrams, on the first day of the inquest into the death of an Aboriginal boy in custody.
>
> It didn't take long for him to die, or for the doctor to explain the immediate cause of his death. Cerebral hypoxia is the medical term.
>
> But the underlying causes of his death are much more complex".

There is no better example among the news stories analysed to date that demonstrates a departure from the media resource kit suggestions for reporting suicide. But is that of critical concern? This story is framed around the headline's message – a stolen child (the stolen generation) and the narrative is constructed with considerable drama, passion and compassion..The phrasing and imagery used in the story underscores the reporter's (Mike Secombe's) ideological position: the child, he writes 'cannot be given a name' because of respect for Aboriginal cultural sensitivities. He died "in custody and alone" and thus it is

an "anonymous tragedy" but out of "desperation and possible mental illness" attention is focused on the Northern Territory's mandatory sentencing laws, which "sent children to jail for the most minor of property offences".

The story has a clear and wider national significance as it links the current scene in the courtroom to the Howard Government and internal coalition parties dissent, Australia's non-compliance with its human rights obligations, and international criticism. Secombe is a political reporter and, for him, this is a political story. It is a 'national embarrassment' and significant newsworthy event, he writes. In detailing the days leading up to the boy's suicide, as related in court, the story highlights the 'failures' of the NT legal system, carers, prosecutors and defence lawyers. Empathy with the victim is clear and described as a "typical sniffer crime". "He was after solvents; these were the actions of an addled addict, not a hardened criminal". The cause of death, as attributed by the story, is the law and the Northern Territory government. People involved with the case are "well-intentioned" and "doing their best" in the face of no resources and no training. This situation is forced on them by a "government more concerned with appearing tough on (mostly black) crime than with addressing a problem". The story concludes:

> "And you see that problem a hundred times every day in Darwin: in the main street, and right outside the $100 million pomposity of a Parliament, which sits 30 days a year. Black hopelessness, black drunkenness. Black people begging on the street.
>
> That boy's death was only one small example of a larger tragedy".

In summary, the story exemplifies one dilemma about guidelines on reporting suicide. The journalist accurately reports testimony given by Dr Zillman about how the boy died – facts used for 'dramatic effects' to support 'the stolen life' frame. But when we examine the 'dramatic effects', which include details of how "little time and effort" it takes "to commit suicide by strangulation", the relationship between the journalist and the outcome for particular readers is problematic.

In this case, we might accept the journalist's good intentions of using shocking detail to gain attention for the seriousness of the specific case and the wider issues involved. We might speculate that most mainstream *Sydney Morning Herald* readers would see the dramatic devices *as intended* by the journalist and his editor. But we might also worry about the possibility of quite different readings by vulnerable groups. Journalists, one suspects, write with their mainstream audience in mind or, at least, their perceptions about their mainstream audience. Can we reasonably expect them to take account of all other possible audiences and readings?

This central question is linked to definitions and continuing debate about 'journalistic objectivity'. Media framing theory argues that journalists operate at most times unconsciously to include views of society and nation in their output. Journalism resembles other empirical disciplines and professions in its goal to be 'objective' by

being free of values and ideology. Journalistic 'objectivity' is derived from similar fact-gathering methods, which are validated by consensus, much like scientific method. Objectivity, defined as a matter of intent, demands detachment and, importantly, *the freedom to disregard the implications of news* (Gans, 1979: 182-183, 188) (emphasis added).

Suicide Help and Advice Frames

Newspaper reports on suicide often focus on a range of help and advice stories as well as stories about awareness of risk factors and suicide prevention campaigns. This is especially true of regional and suburban newspaper coverage, which may reflect a community concern with suicide among particular community groups. But metropolitan newspapers also carry these stories. Most local and regional newspapers rarely report individual suicide unless there is a local identity is involved. Rather, the focus is on advice and help, which raises the question: do unreported suicides (an editorial decision by the newspaper not to report) lead to later coverage of suicide risk factors and suicide advice news stories and features?

For the most part this type of news is non-reactive in the sense that it reflects what is given as 'information' by community, regional or national groups to newspapers. Usually no enterprise is evident by journalists and their editors. Across many regional and suburban newspapers the same basic story is repeated (almost word for word) reflecting the media release as typical source. These reports often signal forthcoming events or promote an event or activity concerned with advice or a campaign about suicide prevention.

A dominant frame, especially in regional newspapers, is surveillance: 'this is an issue'; 'this is important'; and 'we, as a community, must do something'. In part, this reflects what many scholars have observed about contemporary life. Community fears about natural risks (flood, famine, etc.) are being replaced by fears about 'manufactured risks'; in this case suicide and suicide risk factors, which are linked to concerns about rapidly changing economic conditions, unemployment, family stress, urban decay, poverty and crime, etc. (See, for example, Lupton, 1999).

As a general statement, most community-based news on suicide is 'positively framed' in the sense that the clear intention is to support the community. These stories sometimes receive prominence in newspapers with placement near or on the front page. This signals the story's newsworthiness to the community and reflects very real concern with the issues. Community news frequently involves a local identity or well-known community or regional group (eg: the CWA, Country Women's Association). For example:

"Suicide: recognise the signs" (*Hamilton Spectator*, 19 February: 4)

"Workshop to look at suicide issues" (*McIvor Times* (Heathcote) 1 March: 7

"Campaign aims to reduce suicides" (*Sunraysia Daily* (Mildura) 3 April: 2)

"Koories train to prevent peer suicide" (*Warrnambool Standard*, 27 April: 7)

"Scheme to save a life needs helpers" (*Whittlesea Post*, 3 May: 13

"Programs to focus on suicide: Helping youths at risk" (*Maroondah Journal*, 20 June: 1)

"War on suicide: CWA to fight tragic toll in rural towns" (*Shepparton News*, 5 April: 1)

Metropolitan newspaper coverage on suicide campaigns and advice display, at times, similarities to non-metropolitan coverage but often the news stories and features are framed around social issues and concerns. This can result in news frames that place at-risk groups as 'outsiders' or ad deviant from 'normal' accepted behaviour. The following headlines reveal something of these framing devices.

"Young of the lucky country who can find only one way out: suicide syndrome" (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 15 March: 14)

"Worst days of their lives" (*The Australian*, 10 April: 11) Feature on gay and lesbian pupils at school.

"Girls Drunk at 12" (*Herald-Sun*, 9 May: 7)

"Social time bomb: the state of anguished youth" (*Sunday Age*, 14 May: 10)

"Rising crime. Rising Suicide. Educational failure. What is wrong with our boys?" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 14 June: 9)

Conclusions

The key objective of the Media Monitoring project is to provide practical advice for developing future communication strategies for the Department of Health and Aged care. Specifically, a major goal is to inform the process of revising media resources for journalists and editors in reporting suicide and mental illness news. Our combined methodology of a systematic content analysis of newspaper and broadcast content, supported by qualitative media frame analyses of selected media content, is designed to meet this objective, and to provide advice on future strategies for monitoring media content on suicide and mental illness and health.

To meet the aim of informing the revision of media resources for journalists and editors, our research team regularly meets with a Media Reference Group, which comprises health professionals, consumers, and media industry representatives. Media groups include: the Australian Internet Industry Association, the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters, the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, and the Australian Press Council. These meetings provide the opportunity for open dialogue

between the department, consumers, the media, and the findings of an on-going research process. All participants, to greater or lesser extent, view this process as one of reflexive risk communication. We (as a research team) recognise that our 'technical' or 'expert' knowledge is neither certain or objective; rather we acknowledge that our knowledge is often uncertain and indeterminate. The department recognises that media resources and guidelines need to be produced in active conversation with numerous stakeholders, including journalists, editors, and media industry associations. As Healy and Handmer, 1997, p. 4) put it:

> in the process of dialogue participants reflect on what they really mean, the assumptions underlying their assertions and beliefs, and how their perspectives can be expressed to enable other participants to understand and appreciate it.

This paper has demonstrated how the qualitative component of the research project can inform government policy, and media and public debate. From this perspective, we have attempted to shift the focus of debate away from research projects designed to support or question relationships between media coverage of suicide and the prevalence of suicidal behaviours. Such research leads to a very limited conception of media responsibilities and an overly narrow framework for evaluating media performance. Our primary focus is the longer-term picture that the news media presents of suicide (and mental illness) and it raises many questions about the clash between the imperatives of the news organisation, and the imperatives of governmental resources concerning the reporting of suicide.

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